

Cami Rhinehart has been selected as the 2016 Graham-Greenlee First Things First Champion for Young Children.

The award is given to local champions who actively volunteer their time to raise public awareness of the importance of early childhood development and health. Champions spend a significant amount of time volunteering with FTF and building public awareness about the importance of early childhood issues.



Rinehart engaged in awareness-raising efforts such as:

- Hosting an information table at the annual Harvest Festival and Head Start Family Fun Day.
- Attending training on early childhood messaging.
- Co-hosting two Early Childhood Every Day trainings.
- Presenting at an Early Childhood Coalition meeting where she is an active participant.
- Recruiting sign-ups for the FTF Newsletter at various events.
- Distributing Birth to 5 Helpline magnets and instructing parents on the free service open to all families with young children looking for the latest child development information from experts in the field.

We recently caught up with Rhinehart, who works as Imagination Library Coordinator and Infant Storytime Facilitator at the Safford Public Library.

**Question: Why do you feel early childhood development and health is so important?**

**Answer:** Learning begins at birth. The early years, before kindergarten, are key for brain development and social skills. It is much easier and more effective to instill a love of learning and to teach good habits from the beginning than to try to do it later. The skills children learn between birth and 5 affect them for the rest of their lives. Executive functions developed before kindergarten will affect their abilities to find and keep jobs; to be productive citizens. Bad health choices and learning patterns are much harder to fight later than to prevent.

**Q: What caused you to get involved in efforts to increase public awareness in early childhood issues?**

**A:** When I was pursuing my teaching degree, I saw firsthand the differences in the kids in school who had a support system versus those who didn't. You could tell which kids had parents who had and still cared about education regarding both cognitive and social skills. Really, it was when I had my own children that the issue captured my heart. I held my first son in my arms and knew I wanted to find every resource I could to help me as a mom and also wanted every mom to know what is out there for them.

**Q: Why do you feel building awareness in early childhood and developmental health is so important for families and communities?**

**A:** By building awareness we inspire action. Acting early instead of waiting until problems arise really benefits our children, which benefits and helps build a strong community and future for all of us. Also, I see adults daily struggling to try to meet this perfect standard of parenting. Isn't it so much better when they can lean on others in the community to help take the unnecessary stresses off and help them both

figure out how to be the best parent/caregiver possible and also support them and let them know that their best is surely good enough?

**Q: How have you seen awareness for the early years change in your community?**

**A:** I am very proud of the community that I live in. The schools and public organizations work hand in hand, which is much more effective than each group working alone as an individual. I believe that people are truly understanding that helping young children doesn't only help them get ready for school, but is helping to build a stronger community and future for all of us. It's obvious that awareness is spreading and people are catching that fire and wanting to do their part.

**Q: How do you suggest other people in your community get involved?**

**A:** Keep learning about what is going on in your community and keep the conversation moving. Somewhere out there is a mom like I was who wants to help her child but doesn't know what is out there. By knowing the programs and events in the community, we are ready to help that mom when we are lucky enough to cross paths with her. The more we know, the more we can help. By keeping the conversation moving, she is that much more likely to have an opportunity to hear our message. I also think that just keeping the conversation going so that people stay focused and those fires we lit in the hearts of others never go out.